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‘Earth and Stone’: Improvement, Entailment, and Geographical Futures in the Novel of the 1820s

Penny Fielding

In Susan Ferrier’s 1824 novel *The Inheritance*, the authoritarian Lord Rossville is invited to view the landscape of his estate in all its natural beauty. Yet what should be a routine act in an early nineteenth-century novel proves impossible for him:

In vain were creation’s charms spread before his eyes. – There is a mental blindness, darker than that which shrouds the visual orb, and Nature’s works were to Lord Rossville an universal blank, or rather they were a sort of account-book, in which were registered all his own petty doings. It was here he had drained – there he had embanked – here he had planted – there he had cut down – here he had built a bridge – there he had made a road – here he had levelled – there he had raised, &c. &c. &c. To all that his own head had planned he was feelingly alive; but, for the ‘dread magnificence of Heaven,’ he had neither eye, ear, nor soul, and must, therefore, be forgiven, if insensible to its influence.¹

As the veil of the aesthetic is ripped away without ceremony to uncover the economic condition of the land, aesthetic experience is reduced to the condition of the account book.

This in turn occasions a shift in temporality. The long historical perspective of improvement, together with the eternal vision of natural theology, are both reduced to notes made in the present. In place of the gradual, incremental sweep of agricultural improvement and aesthetic landscaping, Lord Rossville can see only an oscillating series of binary alternatives in which change has no forward movement.

Such moments of stasis or interruptions to the progressive temporality of history can be found quite frequently in Scottish novels of the 1820s, as if history and narrative are reviewing their relationship. Walter Scott’s *Saint Ronan’s Well* of 1823, for example, sits uneasily in its own time in terms both of history and of narrative. This is in part because it was an experiment, as his only novel to have a nineteenth-century setting, and one which did not sit well with a contemporary readership – the volume was generally poorly received by reviewers. *Saint*

Ronan's Well's uneasy attempt at contemporaneity, however, is already rehearsed within its narrative. The plot – part novel of manners, part Gothic story of past secrets and sexual betrayal – is barely resolved with Scott's killing off of his heroine.² The familiar political trajectory of a Scottish-set *Waverley* novel, which moves towards a reaffirmation of a united nation, pushes the novel outside the expected course of history into a kind of temporal stasis. In an important reading of the novel, Robert Irvine argues that,

[T]he status of *Saint Ronan's Well* as a representation of *contemporary* society [...] raises questions of the place of the present in Scott's fiction generally, and the sort of future that is envisioned by the ending of what are conspicuously historical novels.³

Irvine helpfully shows the interplay of narrative and historical temporalities – the endings of novels are important for their sense of the present as they confer a teleological back-interpretation on the narrative. If novels do not end 'satisfactorily', the present remains uncharacterized.

In addition to this aspect of plot, a number of 1820s novel – including *Saint Ronan's Well* – think about their own historical temporality at individual moments within the narrative as well as in their narrative structure. *Saint Ronan's Well* follows the attempts of a number of investors to establish a fashionable spa resort in the Scottish Borders, close to the existing village of Saint Ronan's. Early in the novel, the returning nabob, Mr Touchwood, encounters Mr Bindloose, a lawyer with financial interests, and they strike up a conversation. Mr Bindloose advertises the improvements – economic, agricultural and architectural – that have been made to the neighbourhood, but is surprised to find that Mr Touchwood is unimpressed by the changes wrought in his absence:

'You do not seem much delighted with our improvements, sir?' said the banker, astonished to hear a dissentient voice where he conceived all men were unanimous.

'Pleased?' answered the stranger – 'Yes, as much pleased as I am with the devil, who, I believe, set many of them agoing. Ye have got an idea that everything must be changed – Unstable as water, ye shall not excel – I tell ye, there have been more

changes in this poor nook of yours within the last forty years, than in the great empires of the East for the space of four thousand, for what I know.'

'And why not,' replied Bindloose, 'if they be changes for the better?'

'But they are *not* for the better,' replied Mr. Touchwood, eagerly. 'I left your peasantry as poor as rats indeed, but honest and industrious, enduring their lot in this world with firmness, and looking forward to the next with hope – Now they are mere eye-servants – looking at their watches, forsooth, every ten minutes, least they should work for their master half an instant after loosing-time – And then, instead of studying the Bible on the weekdays, to kittle the clergyman with doubted points of controversy on the Sabbath, they glean all their theology from Tom Paine and Voltaire.'⁴

This exchange explores the collapse of a secure sense of historical time that has been brought about by changes in a geographical and spatial perspective. For Mr Touchwood, the temporal relation between the local and the global has been turned inside out as the agricultural workers no longer follow a social order imposed by the rhythms of the land. Asked about agricultural improvement, Touchwood immediately identifies a disruption in temporality; he compares the perceived pace of change of Saint Ronan's with the historical progress of distant empires. The local – which should be the preserve of slow, traditional time – is now transforming more rapidly than the outside world. Time, space and the relation between them have become, in the Biblical phrase, 'unstable as water'.

A further temporal disruption comes with Touchwood's analysis of the condition of the 'peasantry', which itself marks an unstable point in social history. 'Loosing-time' was originally a term in agricultural labour that referred to loosing the horses at the end of a day's work.⁵ But throughout the nineteenth century it enters into a more general meaning of finishing work and then the more specific factory term of 'clocking-off'.⁶ Similarly, the primary meaning of 'watch' here is presumably something like 'overseer' (unless Scott is imagining the kind of fob watch he himself would own). But the phrase, specifying the precise interval of ten minutes, conjures up the image of checking a clock and moves the novel towards the industrial time of the mid-nineteenth-century novel.⁷ Just as the labourers'

working-week is no longer prescribed by their relationship to the Kirk (a highly idealized local bond in nineteenth-century Scottish writing), so their day has become alienated from what Touchwood thinks of as the natural contours of seasonal work. The moment recreates a nostalgic temporality to compensate for a growing consciousness of the economic structure of wage-labour as it is seen to replace the age-old bonds of tenantry. Plotting this point in the history of the novel, particularly as it moves from *Saint Ronan's Well's* rural location to the city, we might note it would be only two decades before the concept of time as an economic commodity would be a focal point of Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854).

As the 1820s witness this shift in structures of time in the novel, its formal genres also come under pressure. In particular, the Scottish novel's relationship with the Anglo-Irish model of the national tale becomes strained or emptied out, and along with it the sense that the national narrative must be rooted in land.⁸ We have already witnessed this in the case of *Saint Ronan's Well*. Robert Irvine argues that Scott's experimentation in that novel with contemporaneity demonstrates the inability of the Scottish historical novel – in which cultural difference is located in past – to adapt itself to the national tale's 'synchronous dispersal of difference'.⁹ That is, the present narrative time of the national tale, through which the protagonist travels to recognize the lessons of the historical past, has lost its instructional capacity.¹⁰

Many of Scott's later novels abandon the British nation altogether in favour of other European localities or the Middle East. In his return to Scotland for 1824's *Redgauntlet*, Scott again moves away from the trajectory of the national tale, and its narrative structure that reads nation through place.¹¹ For the new bourgeois hero, Darsie Latimer, land ownership is almost an afterthought. His uncle Hugh Redgauntlet's family were disinherited after the

Jacobite rebellion of 1715 and although Darsie eventually inherits his mother's estate, the land is not described and the novel is uninterested in its specific material or economic value. The novel's chief improver – whose property we do see in detail – is the quaker Joshua Geddes, unrelated to the main family line, who cultivates his garden in a domestic setting. As if to underscore this loss of land as a substrate for history, the novel's itinerant geography has as its most memorable location the shifting sands of the Solway Firth, with its local economy a dispute about fishing rights.

In the 1820s, the national tale – at least as a way of understanding Scottish historical experience – starts to become etiolated in more purely geographical terms as it moves on to test 'peripheral' regions beyond the now-familiar literary spaces of Ireland or the Highlands of Scotland. The first novel to venture as far as the Shetland Islands, the furthest point north in the British Isles, is Dorothea Primrose Campbell's *Harley Radington* of 1821. Campbell uses an Edgeworth-like plot of a hero whose birth-identity at the geographical limits of the nation is first masked by his metropolitan upbringing and then rediscovered when he travels to his birth-location. But *Harley Radington* is striking because of its refusal to offer a geographical resolution for its narrative problems. Neither of the islands' two projects for improving the land survives the duration of the novel. Having discovered his Shetland roots, Harley abandons the place altogether, marries a conventionally Scottish woman, and ends in satisfied retirement outside London. He pays a final, brief visit to Shetland only to discover that almost everyone he had known there has died, and that the records of his experiences are being erased from the landscape. In a symbolic act of memorialization, he had erected a marble gravestone over the grave of his best friend, but at the end of the novel Harley discovers that this has been washed away in the storm as if the very ground cannot take the

print of memory. The substance of land itself seems unable to hold in place the narrative structure of the national tale.¹²

At the end of the year that saw the publication of *Harley Radington*, a much more successful and widely-read Shetland-set novel contemplates a geography even further removed from the national tale's identification of metonymic regions. Scott's *The Pirate* essays on a larger scale the disappearance of the local as geographically distinct or even recognisable as a locality in the first place. The Englishman Basil Mertoun has arrived on the islands not as the hero of a national tale, on a journey of ethnographic discovery, but to lie low after a career in piracy. Basil declares that he has no interest in geographical specificities: 'I am indifferent to climate; if there is but air enough to fill my lungs, I care not if it be the breath of Arabia or of Lapland.' He voices a cynical vision of a global commerce that has overtaken the entire earth: 'Every thing in the universe is bought and sold. [...]. The earth is rented, from its surface down to its most central mines;--the fire, and the means of feeding it, are currently bought and sold'.¹³ And buying and selling in a world increasingly perceived as a commercial market, begin to edge out the permanence of land and scenes of its possible improvement in the novel. Miranda Burgess, writing of *Saint Ronan's Well*'s sense of an unanchored present, sees this commercialized sphere as a condition of his work in the decade more widely: 'In his novels of the 1820s [...] Scott replaces archaic oral culture with a commercial present that lacks an origin and, avowedly, an end'.¹⁴

This is certainly the case in Scott's late work *The Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827) which marks a turn away from the novel altogether. The first volume of the *Chronicles* (Scott also used the series title for *The Fair Maid of Perth*) is a collection of stories told to and related by the fictional narrator Chrystal Croftangry. At the start of the work, Croftangry returns to

Edinburgh after a long absence only to find that his patrimonial estate, which he had squandered in his youth, has been modernized to the destruction of its character and is now for sale. Croftangry traces his reaction to this unresolved homecoming as a temporal one, mapped by his personal experience. At first it appears as if a Romantic exercise of memory can restore his subjective connection to his home. While he has been overseas, his residual memories of ‘the beauties of nature which had once surrounded me in the home of my forefathers’ had acted upon him over time, gradually piecing together a picture of the ‘neglected stores which my memory had involuntarily recorded, and when excited, exerted herself to collect and to complete’.¹⁵ But this Wordsworthian idyll cannot be fulfilled. Memory does not serve to intensify and feed the present moment, but comes to an abrupt halt, at which point the future is an impersonal conjecture. Croftangry’s response to the access of memory is a regret that conflates ‘home’ with commercial ventures: ‘Had but one single farm been reserved [...] I should have had a place I could call my home, and something I could call my business’.¹⁶

As in the case of Lord Rossville’s account book in *The Inheritance*, nature here has been monetized; the property is now again for sale and Croftangry comes across an advertisement for it in the newspaper. The advertisement merges aesthetic, agricultural, and financial categories (‘the advantages of the soil, situation, natural beauties and capabilities of improvement, not forgetting its being a freehold estate’), and measures the temporal range of improvement by short-term profit, specifying the difference between the current value and its price at the last sale ‘to show the improvable character of the land’.¹⁷ Improvement, once the harnessing of natural forces, is here reduced to the documentation of a newly industrialized landscape (there is now a mill on the property). In fact, the whole estate has become de-temporalized. Croftangry inspects the new house that has been built in place of his former

home. With no distance between past and present, time itself has been replaced by a static and alienating modernity that seems to end almost as soon as it has begun:

It was in that state of desertion which is perhaps the most unpleasant to look on, for the place was going to decay, without having been inhabited. There were about the mansion, though deserted, none of the slow mouldering touches of time, which communicate to buildings, as to the human frame, a sort of reverence, while depriving them of beauty and of strength. The disconcerted schemes of the Laird of Castle-Treddles, had resembled fruit that becomes decayed without ever having ripened.¹⁸

In all of these examples, historical or political stasis is related to improvement in its broadest sense – the manipulation of land in the cause of an optimistic futurity. In these novels, the shape of temporal experience can no longer be reliably plotted on the land. Lying beneath this disturbance in the novel as a genre is a shift in the two great plates of the Scottish Enlightenment: history and geography. Scottish philosophy had entertained the claim that it was only through attention to geography that history could be understood in the first place, and in fact that history is in some sense produced by geography. Despite Hume's scepticism about natural causes, Montesquieu remained very influential in Scotland, a country which seemed, at least in the eighteenth-century, to demonstrate that a history of a nation depended on its land (fertile, mountainous and so on), its climate (hot or cold) and its situation (as an island, or continent). Political culture was a product of land. Scotland offered a miniaturized version of this argument – the mountains and archipelagos of the west, and the fertile lowlands of the central belt, seemed to offer very different national histories. Geography does not absolutely determine history – which is why agricultural improvement was so much debated – but it provides a way of understanding and explaining it. In fact improvement in its ideal form imagines a balance between geographical determinism and control over the land: it is advanced cultures, produced by their fertile environments, that have the power to improve and change the land.

The examples from 1820s novels repeat this unease with the ways in which history can be understood by its relation to geography, and how the future – for example in the case of agricultural improvement – can be predicted in relation to the land that supports it. And this in turn can be seen as a change in the nature of land itself as a measure of progress. In a fundamental way, according to stadial theory, land had produced history, as only fertile soils could sustain the agricultural progress that paved the way from barbarism to commercial society. Land, then, had a special position in a society's progress. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, the relation between land and progress had undergone a shift. Rather than land being accepted as the foundational substrate of history, it had become one of many commodities in a commercial society and in particular a good that could be the subject of speculation.

In his 1806 *Commentary on Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws* (translated into English in 1811) the French economic philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy elucidates and extends Montesquieu's analysis of the relations of land and law. For Tracy, land has no special position in economic society. Cementing a reaction in the later eighteenth century against the physiocratic school of French economic philosophy, which argued for agriculture as the principal driver of national wealth and land as the substance of property, Destutt de Tracy also breaks the causal link between improvement and progress. For him, attachment to land is at best a relic of an earlier stage of society, to which he believes the privileging of agriculture belongs, and at worst an unproductive and sentimental attachment to tracts of land in a feudal form of ownership.

In a temporary disagreement with the economist Jean-Baptiste Say, Destutt de Tracy complains that Say,

persists in considering a tract of land, as a possession of a particular nature, its productive service as something else than a utility to be derived from a tool; and its rent as different from the interest given for a capital lent.¹⁹

Tracy's view is that land has been wrongly seen as a separate category, possessed of 'a sort of magical virtue attributed to the earth' which he in turn attributes to an over-emphasis on agriculture as the source of prosperity.²⁰ Not even land can escape the general truth that 'being incapable of creating even an atom of matter, we can never effect any thing but transmutation and transformation'.²¹ Tracy insists that unless land is seen as a pure commodity, 'it is impossible to give any consistent account of the progress of society, and of the formation of our wealth'.²² For him, land is no longer to be primarily characterized by its global position, or its fertility, but by its exchange value. And this has the further effect of removing commerce in general and land in particular from the steady temporal course of improvement. If the value of land is financial, then it cannot be improved incrementally. Its value will depend on the unpredictable contingencies of commercial context or numbers of speculators: 'A very indifferent tract of land may sell very dear, when there are many persons desirous of purchasing it'.²³

This returns us to the 1820s and a point in which radically different concepts of the temporality of land were coming into conflict. First, in an intensification of the economic theory of Destutt de Tracy, the buying, selling and development of land were becoming as important – and in some cases more so – than its improvement in either agricultural or aesthetic terms. Angela Esterhammer characterizes the 1820s as a time above all of speculation. She identifies 'an era of experimentation with new technologies, media, and

genres when the word “speculation” itself was ever more frequently used’, and a ‘late-Romantic interest in the speculative mindset within these contexts, since it was a way of exploring relationships between the individual and the collective, between information, change, and unpredictability’.²⁴ And secondly, the 1820s witness a fresh confrontation with an issue that had long been seen to hamper the course of progress in Scotland – the law of entail. If improvement, as a way of imagining and controlling a future, was losing its efficacy, so too was property law in the shape of entails.

The spectre of entailed estates had haunted Scotland throughout the eighteenth century and was generally assumed to be a problem particularly associated with that country.

A dissatisfaction with entails (the act of restricting the line of inheritance of an estate that prevents the sale of its land in the future) had been frequently voiced throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. A typical example is Lord Kames:

How repugnant to the frail state of man, are such swollen conceptions! Upon these however are founded entails, which have prevailed in many parts of the world, and unhappily at this day infest Scotland. Did entails produce no other harm but the gratification of a distempered appetite for property, they might be endured, though far from deserving approbation: but, like other transgressions of nature and reason, they are productive of much mischief, not only to commerce, but to the very heirs for whose benefit it is pretended that they are made.²⁵

Kames’s images of the swollen body and sickening appetite of a man who entails his estate, and spreads plague through the nation, and the disgust to which they give rise, are given an even more graphic account by a less well known-source. Entails are described by one Thomas Newte, author of *Prospects and Observations on a Tour in England and Scotland*, a revised version of which appeared in 1791 (though claiming to be an English gentleman, ‘Thomas Newte’ was neither English nor much of a gentleman. He was in fact William Thomson, a minister in Perth who had had to leave his parish after certain improprieties and

was making a living as a jobbing writer in London). Thomson's tour is interesting in many ways, not least for his Gothic account of entails:

Thus the estate [...] was blasted by an icy union with an estate of entail; and thus a rapid progress is made in the inhuman baseness of locking up the land of Scotland in the hands of a few great proprietors, who are only a kind of stewards for posterity, and who have as little inducement to improve their estates themselves, as power to admit of their improvement by others.

If a fondness for entails has become epidemical among our northern neighbours; if the natural desire of a posthumous existence in the minds of future generations has in them degenerated into insanity; it will be an act of kindness, on the part of the British Legislature, to the individuals who suffer by their madness, as well as a service to the Public, to bring a remedy for their distemper: for such this hydropical hunger and thirst after the earth; this *Gaio-Mania* may be justly considered.²⁶

Thomson's 'Gaio-mania' substitutes one future for another. The future of improvement, guaranteeing prosperity for generations to come, is replaced with a mania that condemns those generations to service the 'a posthumous existence' of the donor. In Thomson's vivid account, the very future of the land itself seems to be disappearing as it is sucked up in such a 'hydropical hunger and thirst after the earth' – a kind of vampiric appetite that brings about the living death of progress. The future imagined by an act of entailment is an ironic 'progress' of the inhuman in which all difference is reduced to a condition of sameness.

The 1820s mark an intensification of weariness with entailed estates and in 1828 a House of Commons Select Committee was convened to review the situation. The evidence of one of the witnesses called by the committee, John Ferrier, an Edinburgh lawyer and businessman, is typical of the discontent with entails. An entailed estate is improperly calibrated to modern capitalism because money cannot be borrowed against it, and it thus excludes the owner from political influence:

I think that in many cases the proprietor of an entailed estate is deprived both of credit and of consequence. In the first place, if he has only an entailed estate and no other means, he can get no money for any purpose whatever, without borrowing upon annuity

and insuring his life at a great expense. That has been done very generally in Scotland, and the consequences have been very ruinous to many. With regard to consequence, a proprietor of an entailed estate, however large, has no political influence ; he cannot make a vote upon his estate, or bestow one upon any of his family, except his heir apparent; he may have other sons, yet he has it not in his power to make any arrangement of that kind.²⁷

More specifically, entails were seen as a block on progress and improvement. Another witness at the 1828 Select Committee was Patrick Irvine, an advocate who had two years earlier published a pamphlet on the subject of entails. Irvine articulates the position that entails hinder improvement and consequently national progress, and, like Destutt de Tracy, rejects a separate case for land in a commercial economy:

It seems too plain to require argument that the mode of management, which the great proportion of entailed proprietors must adopt, is unfavourable to the progressive improvement of the country; and it seems now to be generally admitted that commerce of every description, including that of land, should be as free and open to competition as the protection of individual interests will permit.²⁸

Here, again, entails emerge as a problem for and in temporality. They represent an unpredictable gamble on the future, and Irvine reads the law of entail as a kind of Gothic temporal drama in which a monstrous individual tries to resist what should be the kind of future promised by improvement, enlightenment and progress:

Human wisdom cannot anticipate events so as to appreciate duly, and to regulate the rights and interests of posterity with discriminating foresight for any period of long duration. The rules according to which justice is administered, and all public acts of the country are subject to alteration according to the changes produced by time and circumstances. The uncontrolled power and domination of individuals over property should not be of unlimited duration. How many entailers would have rejected the order of succession pointed out by them, and the restrictions contained in their deeds, if they could have anticipated the intervening course of events, and the situation of their posterity.²⁹

We can trace Irvine's discontent in the novels of the decade. In Ferrier's *The Inheritance* entails are a punitive condition that might be introduced at any point by a capricious or

whimsical landowner. Lord Rossville uses the legal means of entail to threaten his niece (the novel's heroine) with disinheritance:

His lordship next proceeded to state, that he had consulted the most eminent counsel as to the deeds of entail; and that three of them were of opinion, that the whole of the property could and might be most effectually alienated, disposed, and otherwise disposed of, to the utter exclusion of Miss St. Clair, as heiress at law.³⁰

But the 1820s novel that most extensively and rigorously explores that decade's interrogation of the relation of land, property, history and improvement is John Galt's ironic masterpiece of 1823, *The Entail*.

The Entail follows the fortunes of Claud Walkinshaw and his descendants through three generations as he attempts to regain and maintain the family fortune – originally lost through investment in the failed Darien venture of 1698-1700 – through purchase, marriage and legal entail. Like the other 1820s novels I have mentioned, *The Entail* challenges the possibility of the smooth, incremental course of history. Progress is restricted by an obstructive present. For a novel that seems at first to comprehend a vast swathe of history from Darien to the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, history itself, as a number of commentators have accurately noticed, is a troublesome affair. As Ian Duncan argues, the plot of *The Entail* progresses by means of accidental events that undermine notions of causality and intention.³¹ Alyson Bardsley points out that it is not entirely clear in the novel what form historical progress might take in the first place, as Galt 'refuses to characterise [the family] fortunes as either rising or falling in any clear-cut way'.³² Mark Schoenfield observes that change in the novel tends towards iterations of the same: 'What is said before dictates what will happen afterwards, and, like the novel itself, the entail is constituted by its own reiterations, since Scottish law required it to be re-incorporated into each subsequent disposition of the property.'³³

The Entail's black comedy maintains a stubborn refusal of the possibility of those linked terms in the Scottish Enlightenment, progress and improvement, a pairing that seems to depend on the harmonious relation of history to geography in general, and land to progress in particular. A crucial moment early in the novel marks Claud's response to his regaining the patrimonial lands of Grippy and his decision to entail the estate:

The feelings of the mariner returning home, when he again beholds the rising hills of his native land, and the joys and fears of the father's bosom, when, after a long absence, he approaches the abode of his children, are tame and calm, compared to the deep and greedy satisfaction with which the persevering pedlar received the earth and stone that gave him infeftment of that cold and sterile portion of his forefathers' estate. In the same moment he formed a resolution worthy of the sentiment he then felt, – a sentiment which, in a less sordid breast, might have almost partaken of the pride of virtue. He resolved to marry, and beget children, and entail the property, that none of his descendants might ever have it in their power to commit the imprudence which had brought his grandfather to a morsel, and thrown himself on the world.³⁴

Galt here drives a wedge between two positions and two forms of literary narrative. On the one hand is the sentimental geography of the mariner who returns to his native hills measured by the apparently natural family plot of parent and child. And on the other, the 'sterile' literalization of land as a form of ownership. At the heart of this moment in the narrative--perhaps of the novel as a whole – is the ontology of 'earth and stone'. What does it mean, Galt asks, to possess land? What is the relation of matter to representation and nature to civic law? How does the possession of land as a singular act manifest itself in history?

The term 'sterile' has several resonances, linking Claud as a subject to a wider idea of land. He is described by the narrator as restricted emotionally to 'the sterile sensibilities of his own bosom' and by the lawyer Mr Keelevin as a 'stinting and [...] sterile father'.³⁵ The association reinforces the idea that Claud's selfish act of entailing the estate has no productive future, and his ambition 'to renew my ancestry' in fact re-animates his family history into a kind of living death.³⁶ But 'sterile' is also a term from political economy, used

most prominently not of land itself, but by the physiocrat school of French economy to dismiss a mercantile economy that was not founded on land-ownership. Adam Smith, here translating ‘stérile’ as ‘barren’, sums up the physiocrats’ attack on ‘the class of artificers, manufacturers, and merchants, whom they endeavour to degrade by the humiliating appellation of the barren or unproductive class’.³⁷ Galt turns the challenge to physiocracy on its head. Claud Walkinshaw, the ex-pedlar who has made his money from buying and selling, chooses exactly that form of landownership that will be the least productive.

The phrase ‘earth and stone’ in the passage above reduces land to its most fundamental material form so that it can be converted into property. Galt is here using the legal language of ‘infetment’, the act of assuming ownership of land, originally by the literal delivery of earth and stone. In 1681 Lord Stair had described this act within Scots law:

Possession is attained Symbolically, where there is not use of the whole or a part, but only of a Symbol or Token, and this is when the thing to be possest, is present, as the civil possession by Infetment, by delivery of Earth and Stone upon the Ground of the Lands, or by delivery of a parcel of Corns for a Stack or Field of Corn, or some of a herd or Flock for the whole Flock being present, in which the Symbols being also parts of the thing to be possest, have some affinity to natural possessions.³⁸

The novel here catches the aporetic condition of the law of land ownership that Stair describes when the material ‘thing’ – the earth and stone – can only be owned when it is in a symbolic state. Or to put it another way, in order for matter to become ‘symbolic’, that is representable as property, it must first be seen to exist in its most basic and non-symbolic condition. It must simply be ‘earth and stone’, matter that seemingly precedes possession – it is ‘the thing to be possest’. But Stair’s language complicates the situation. Infetment is both a symbolic ritual and a material act that has ‘some affinity to natural possession’. There is something oxymoronic in this phrase. The act is really a metonym, a figure of speech – there can be no literal or ‘natural’ possession, but only ‘some affinity’ to it. In the very act of producing a part of the material land, its very materiality vanishes. The ‘thing to be possest’

can never in fact be possessed *as* a thing. Claud's obsession with regaining the family land is not just a psychological fixation but a structural condition of property itself. For ownership to take place, land has to be produced as matter, earth and stone, but at the same time, the act of infeftment recognizes that this matter is also symbolic and can only approach to, rather than actually *be* in, a state of 'natural possession'.

As Bardsley points out, *The Entail* conducts its scrutiny of land-ownership by isolating Claud from all its traditional political virtues and connection with civic society: 'Infeftment links the landholder to history; parliamentary politics, the politics of commercial society and its definitions of the public person' – none of which Claud manifests in any way.³⁹ And the novel focuses on this specifically in the necessary relation between the material and the symbolic in an economy. For Destutt de Tracy, it is the very materiality of the land, again expressed as 'earth and stone' ('de terre et du pierre' in his original euphonious phrase) that removes from it any inherent value, and renders it valuable only in relation to its position in a commercial, capitalist economy. He attacks the 'prejudice' of the belief that land-ownership is a special kind of property when it is in fact 'it is a possession similar to others':

On the contrary, by renouncing this prejudice, and firmly persuading ourselves that what we call land.... that is to say, a cube of earth and stone having one of its faces on the superficies of our globe.... is a mass of matter as well as any other, with this difference, that it cannot as a body change its place. [...] Whatever it may be, a piece of ground, like any other tool, is susceptible of many uses, as we have just seen. When good for nothing, its value is nothing; when of any use, it has a value; when it belongs to no one, it requires only the trouble of taking possession; when it belongs to any one, some other useful thing must be given in exchange for it. In all cases.... to express myself like others.... it exactly and without any difference is equivalent to the *capital* that can be procured by giving it up, and may, as most convenient, be given away, or lent, sold or rented, or used immediately by its proprietor, but nothing else can ever be done with either one or the other, but to apply them in one or other of these five ways.⁴⁰

Like Lord Stair, although in a very different political context, Destutt insists that before land can be owned it must be seen as ‘a mass of matter as well as any other’, and once seen in this way, it can then be exchanged like any other commodity. It is, paradoxically, the apparent solidity of land that absorbs it into an economy of ‘transmutation and transformation’.⁴¹

Claud’s obsessive privileging not only of land, but of ‘his’ land, carries this to a fatal extreme. As Ian Duncan notes, ‘The problem with Claud’s motive is that [...] it is not a productive mode of desire that accumulates property as a means to increase wealth’.⁴² Claud believes in the materiality of land, but not in its place in the modern speculative economy. He thinks only in term of acquisition, and not of capital or investment: ‘although different desirable opportunities presented themselves for investing his money in other and more valuable land, he kept it ever ready to redeem any portion of his ancestral estate that might be offered for sale’.⁴³ Entailing the estate, so far from projecting its future outwards, enacts an inward movement, reducing it to the object of William Thomson’s *Gaio-mania* – a ‘hydropical hunger and thirst after the earth’ that removes all matter from external productivity.

The Entail writes this structure throughout its three volumes. The act of infeftment is parodied in the Walkinshaw family’s attempt to disinherit the second son, on whom Claud (now dead) had attempted to settle the estate. Watty is a ‘natural’, simple-minded. The novel makes a legal pun on the idea of ‘natural’ heir in which Watty both is natural (he is simple) and is not natural (he is the second son, heir by entail and not by birth). Paradoxically in order to prove that he is the ‘natural’ heir in the first sense, he has to be produced in a court of law and proven to be not only a ‘natural’ but also a ‘fatuus’, a term which everyone, including the narrator, henceforth uses of him. When Claud himself comments, as he disinherits his first-born son, that ‘we’re no now in a state o’ nature but a state o’ law’, the novel underscores the

difficulty of telling these states apart.⁴⁴ As we have seen in the case of the act of infeftment, the legal act of possession shades matter into symbol, and nature into law.

The Entail marks a radical separation of land as matter and as discourse that does strange things to the idea of landscape. As in the case of *The Inheritance's* Lord Rossville, the aesthetic fails to be a way of making land meaningful. In *The Entail* the aesthetic of land is wrenched away from its origins in transcendental empiricism (the sublime) or the recognition of universal social bonds (the beautiful) and becomes an additional feature, inassimilable to the legal ownership of land. Characters have isolated moments of sensibility unrelated to the main plot, and the sublime generally kills them off. First-born Charles, the 'natural' heir dies after plunging into a river to which his feelings seem to correspond (the river 'was swelled with rains, and pouring its troubled torrent almost as violently as the tide of feelings that struggled in his bosom').⁴⁵ George the 'legal' heir after the disinheritance of Watty, is carried off by a storm of the North coast of Scotland. What should be an affirmation of human greatness (the point of the sublime, as Burke says, is that the subject does *not* die when experiencing natural forms as life-threatening) again repeats the novel's relentless inadmission of the category of the natural altogether.

The Entail's blackly ironic mode extends to its resolution. In a blatantly and deliberately implausible renovation of the romance mode, the most successful estate management is the recovery of the Highland estate of the Frazer family which had been forfeit after the 1745 Jacobite rising. The reclaiming of the estate – the current heir simply buys it back – reads like a parody of the solution to Scott's *Waverley*. In the earlier novel the entailed estate is magicked away by pure commerce. The inevitable union of Rose Bradwardine and Edward Waverley seems at first highly problematic as her ancestral lands, Tulley-Veolan, are entailed

and will pass to a male relative, the Galtian-named Inchgrabbit. But this is quite easily resolved at the end of the novel when Edward simply sells his own estate in England to Colonel Talbot and uses the proceeds to buy the Bradwardine lands for himself. Pure financial exchange, that seems able to cast off law, history and contingency, is mocked in *The Entail* by the implausibility of the sentimental romance plot that surrounds the Highland characters and restores the idea of landownership to that of primogeniture, reverting to a feudal notion that is patently implausible in the world of commercial modernity.⁴⁶ History can only be recovered as fantasy. In the world of Galt's novel, the Ossianic visions and prophecies that come to Mrs Frazer are no better or worse at predicting the future than the apparently enlightened mode of the entail. Like the obliterated gravestone at the end of Campbell's *Harley Radington*, land slips away as a historical marker, uncontained by any legal or narrative mode.

The Entail is the most sustained example of the way land in the 1820s novel becomes unstable or unavailable as a canvass for historical representation, measure of historical progress, or the substrate for the improvement of the future. The 1820s mark a departure from geographical determinism, both in the Enlightenment sense of climate, and in the way the earlier national tale links land to destiny whether through inheritance or through improvement. *The Entail* plays brilliantly with these ideas as Claud's attempts to project a future on his land all fail. Entails themselves had originally been an attempt at legal improvement. In order to modernize feudal land laws, the principle of land held in fee had been a way of diversifying landownership away from the crown, and the entail a way of moving away from what was seen as a more restricted form of inheritance, primogeniture. In the eighteenth century, entails were favoured by Whigs, keen to seize upon a modern system of legalized family that differentiated them from ancient ideas about property.⁴⁷ But Galt's

novel marks the dissolution of any association with the enlightened progress of the law.

Historically, entails project onto land two different readings of the future. On the one hand they are the embodiment of rational modernity, or Whig history, that assumes improvement. On the other is Thomson's *Gaio-mania*, the nightmare version of that history that gobbles up land even before it can be enjoyed. Entails, seemingly the most restrictive of practices, were also the most uncertain – they were in fact very bad at predicting the future they were supposed to ensure, and were much subject to the interpretation of lawyers, as we see in the third volume of *The Entail* where advocates who specialize in entail law are only defeated by accident. At a point where futures were not predictable by either law, or agricultural or aesthetic improvement, but were instead subject to the highly uncertain temporality of speculation, land loses its position in the history of the novel as a genre as it moves forward to the urban social histories of the mid-nineteenth century.

Notes

¹ S. Ferrier, *The Inheritance*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1824), vol. 1, p. 55. The quotation, a popular one, is from James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771-4).

² The novel's reception and its generic instability are interestingly addressed by Emily Allen, 'Re-Marking Territory: *Redgauntlet* and the Restoration of Sir Walter Scott', *Studies in Romanticism*, 37 (1998), pp. 163-82.

³ R. P. Irvine, 'Gender and the Place of Culture in Scott's *Saint Ronan's Well*', *Scottish Studies Review*, 2 (2001), pp. 46-64, on p. 46. See also Juliet Shield's argument that the novel's characters are left in an 'unsatisfying limbo' that echoes the impossibility of political union. *Sentimental Literature and Anglo-Scottish Identity, 1745-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 169.

⁴ W. Scott, *Saint Ronan's Well*, ed. Mark Weinstein (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 135.

⁵ See T. C. Smout and S. Woods (eds), *Scottish Voices 1745-1960* (London: Collins, 1990), p. 94. The only *OED* citation for 'loosing-time' is this instance in *Saint Ronan's Well*.

⁶ See, for example, W. Westall, *The Old Factory* (London: Cassell, 1885): 'He happened to be leaving Moorwell one evening at "loosing" time. As the hands were beginning to pour through the factory gates he was stepping into the gig which was to convey him to Brandwood Hall' (p. 312).

⁷ Although personal watches were not mass-produced until later in the century, there were already efforts to monitor labour by clockwork technology. In 1803 Samuel Day had patented a timepiece that he called the 'Watchman's Noctuary or Labourer's Regulator'. This device was primarily designed to keep city watchmen on their rounds, as they were required to drop a token into the clock at regular intervals, but Day also considered it suitable for 'farmers, manufacturers, ship-carpenters, and others, who employ many labourers, by giving them to know at what hours in the morning, evening, &c. their men come and leave their work'. 'Specification of the Patent granted to Samuel Day', *The Repertory of Arts, Manufactures, and Agriculture*, 2nd Series, 3 (1803), pp. 161-69, on p. 164.

⁸ Ina Ferris has shown us how closely the national tale is woven into the agricultural tours of the later eighteenth century, with improvement as a necessary teleology for the national tale. See *The Romantic National tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁹ Irvine, 'Gender and the Place of Culture', p. 48.

¹⁰ This is particularly true in the case of James Hogg whose strange and powerful historical novel of 1823, *The Three Perils of Woman*, marks, in Ian Duncan's words, 'the dissolution, rather than development, of the domestic national tale into historical romance à la *Waverley*'. I. Duncan, 'The Novel in Scotland', in R. Maxwell and K. Trumpener (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 251-64, on p. 251.

¹¹ Roy Foster identifies in *Redgauntlet* a distant echo of the national tale structure of Maria Edgeworth's *Ormond*, published six years before: 'In both novels young men in search of father-figures explore the peripheries of their disputed nation'. R. F. Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and his Inheritances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 17.

¹² See P. Fielding, 'Genre, Geography and the National Tale: D. P. Campbell's *Harley Radington*', *European Romantic Review*, 23 (2012), pp. 593-611.

¹³ W. Scott, *The Pirate*, ed. M. Weinstein and A. Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 11 and p. 65. For a detailed account of *The Pirate*'s topographical structures, see P. Fielding, "All that is curious in continent and isle": Time, Space and Modernity in "Vacation 1814" and *The Pirate*, forthcoming in *Yearbook of English Studies* 47 (2017).

¹⁴ M. J. Burgess, *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 190.

¹⁵ W. Scott, *Chronicles of the Canongate*, ed. C. Lamont (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 27.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 28 and 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁹ A. L. C. Destutt de Tracy, *A Commentary and Review of Montesquieu's 'Spirit of the Laws'*, trans. T. Jefferson (Philadelphia: William Duane, 1811), p. 189. Destutt de Tracy's work on land ownership was particularly influential in America not least because the English translation was by Jefferson. See N. Onuf and P. Onuf, *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), pp. 223-39. For Destutt de Tracy's political theory in general see B. W. Head, *Ideology and Social Science: Destutt de Tracy and French Liberalism* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985).

²⁰ Destutt de Tracy, *Commentary*, p. 186.

²¹ Ibid., p. 188.

²² Ibid., p. 189.

²³ Ibid., p. 192.

²⁴ A. Esterhammer, 'Speculation and Its Discontents in John Galt's Fiction', paper given at the North American Society for Romantic Studies Conference, University of California, Berkeley, 2016. I am very grateful to the author for a copy of this paper. See also A. J. Dick, 'Walter Scott and the Financial Crash of 1825: Fiction, Speculation, and the Standard of Value', in *Romanticism, Forgery, and the Credit Crunch*, ed. I Haywood, *Romantic Circles Praxis* (2012), at www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/forgery/HTML/praxis.2011.dick.html [accessed 22 November 2016].

²⁵ H. Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, 2nd edn, 4 vols (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1778), vol. 4, p. 449.

²⁶ T. Newte [William Thomson], *Prospects and Observations on a Tour in England and Scotland: Natural, Œconomical, and Literary* (London: G.H.J. and J. Robinson, 1791), p. 385.

²⁷ *Second Report from the Select Committee on Scotch Entails*, (1828), p. 15. *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online*. For the committee on entails see R. H. Campbell, *Owners and Occupiers: Changes in Rural Society in South-West Scotland before 1914* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991), pp. 108-12.

²⁸ P. Irvine, *Considerations on the Inexpediency of the Law of Entail in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1826), p. 77.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

³⁰ Ferrier, *Inheritance*, vol. 1, p. 163.

³¹ I. Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 235-45.

³² A. Bardsley, 'Novel and Nation Come to Grief: The Dead's Part in John Galt's *The Entail*', *Modern Philology*, 99 (2002), pp. 530-63, on p. 542.

³³ M. Schoenfield, 'The Family Plots: Land and Law in John Galt's *The Entail*', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 24.1 (1997), pp. 60-65, on p. 62.

³⁴ J. Galt, *The Entail, or The Lairds of Grippy*, ed. I. A. Gordon (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 12.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 38 and 129.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁷ A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner and W. B. Todd, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), vol. 2, p. 664.

³⁸ J. Dalrymple, Lord Stair, *Institutions of the Law in Scotland*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: printed by the heir of Andrew Anderson, 1681), vol. 1, pp. 197-8.

³⁹ Bardsley, 'Novel and Nation', pp. 548-9.

⁴⁰ Destutt de Tracy, *Commentary*, pp. 190-1. Jefferson's ellipses represent Destutt de Tracy's parentheses rather than omissions.

⁴¹ As Robert Irvine shows, this way of speculating on land was a principle that Galt himself discovered in North America in his work for the Canada Company. R. P. Irvine. 'Canada, Class, and Colonization in John Galt's *Bogle Corbet*', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 46 (2016), pp. 259-76, esp. p. 269.

⁴² Duncan, *Scott's Shadow*, p. 237.

⁴³ Galt, *The Entail*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁶ See C. A. Simmons, "'Feudal Days': John Galt's Ambivalent Medievalism", in R. Hewitt (ed.), *John Galt: Observations and Conjectures on Literature, History and Society* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012) pp. 129-98, esp. pp. 181-4.

⁴⁷ For an important reading of the law of entail in this respect, see S. Macpherson, 'Rent to Own; or, What's Entailed in *Pride and Prejudice*', *Representations*, 82 (2003), pp. 1-23.